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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001132

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: BEIRUT ARCHBISHOP'S ASSESSMENT OF
UPCOMING BY-ELECTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 1074

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: In a meeting with the Ambassador and Special Assistant on July 27, Archbishop Boulos Matar, the Maronite archbishop of Beirut, shared his evaluation of the upcoming parliamentary by-elections in the predominantly Christian Metn district. Matar believes General Aoun's candidate will not win and that Aoun's actions are dividing the Maronite community. Matar believes that Aoun's alliance with opposition March 8th groups has seriously damaged his influence in this election and will be a hindrance in a future campaign for president. Matar also believes that Lebanon needs a strong president to lead the country and he believes that communication with the Shia will be critical in the months before the presidential election. End summary.

Muddle in Metn

12. (C) Holding court in his impressive receiving room, Archbishop Matar began by relaying the causes of personal hard feelings between Amine Gemayel, a candidate for the vacant Metn MP seat, and Michel Aoun, whose bloc has named a candidate to challenge Gemayel. He said that Gemayel refused to receive Aoun during the public condolence period for his son, assassinated MP Pierre Gemayel, despite the fact that he opened his door to members of Aoun's allies in the opposition March 8th coalition, including Hizballah. Matar relayed that Gemayel believes Aoun cannot learn to compromise or cooperate. He is much better at "erasing" people or cutting them out of future dialogues. On the other hand, as Matar stated, Aoun has done himself no favors by forming alliances with March 8th elements and putting his personal agenda before what is best for the country. "That is not how a president should act," stated Matar.

13. (C) Matar and two other archbishops planned to see Aoun July 27 to seek a compromise on the competing Christian candidacies before the election. Matar does not think it is too late to find a compromise, and he said that he will keep reiterating the need for unity. If Aoun wants to be the political figure who represents the Maronite community, he cannot behave so divisively. "Aoun should know better than to try this again," said Matar, referring to Aoun's civil war-era past. Matar said that perhaps it would be best for both Gemayel and Aoun's candidate Khoury to withdraw from the by-elections, postponing the entire process until a later date. But if there is a fight, Matar and his fellow Maronite

archbishops are encouraging their people to vote for Gemayel.

Presidential Proposals and Prospects

14. (C) Archbishop Matar is in favor of electing a strong leader to be president of Lebanon. He believes that if the elections do not happen on time, the Maronites will lose their traditional role in the government. "If we don't get a president this time, we may never get one," he worried. Matar stressed that the Patriarch is encouraging Christian MPs to vote, for the Maronite members of parliament to participate in the government, and for the community to stay active and engaged.

15. (C) Matar feels the time has come to break the destructive political cycle in Lebanon. The Maronites will need the cooperation of both Speaker of Parliament/Shia leader Nabih Berri and General Aoun in the next presidential election to accomplish this, but he cautions about compromising too much.

"We cannot eliminate elections in the name of consensual democracy. There have to be some limits, too." He had some critical words for the Sunni government leaders, saying that they need to be sensitive about certain things. He cited the GOL's proposal to provide Islamic teachings to all Muslim students in Lebanon, regardless of what school or school district was involved. "The Sunnis must not take advantage and they must learn to compromise," admonished Matar.

16. (C) Matar spoke about reaching out to the Shia community, but his message to them was "You have everything you could want here in Lebanon. Now it is time to help defend your country." He compares the rights and privileges of the Shia

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in Lebanon with other countries in the region and believes that Lebanon - and the Maronites - have provided the Shia with an excellent home. He is not very patient with historical grievances and feels that the Shia are driven by "revenge" more than they should be. He does not consider Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah as a true representative of the majority of the Shia. "Nasrallah is horrible, sick and cannot be trusted."

Moving Forward

17. (C) In Matar's opinion, communication will be key in the next few months leading up to presidential elections. He and the other bishops in Lebanon plan to speak to Aoun at least once a week to encourage him to play a constructive role in the country's politics. Matar said, "A defeat in Metn (considered the Christian heartland) would be a wake-up call for most leaders, but Aoun really thinks he is the savior of Lebanon. He reads biographies of De Gaulle and Eisenhower and believes that he will play a similar role in his country's history."

18. (C) Matar said that he personally met with Prime Minister Siniora to "rebuild the bridge that was knocked down" three weeks ago by the Maronite Church's criticism of the government (reftel). He also met with Siniora's ministers to assure them that the Church is not against the government. He merely wanted to remind them to consult with the church on religious matters that come before the government.

19. (C) When asked if he still hoped for intervention from the Vatican, Matar said that everything is helpful at this point.

However, he thinks it would be more useful to appeal to hearts of Lebanon's Shia population. He still fears that there could be another war in the future. He is worried about this and went so far as to say, "Lebanon cannot afford another war. With a 50 billion dollar debt, we can't even pay for it. Outside money would have to flow in to pay for more fighting and nobody wants that."

¶10. (C) As head of the largest Christian archdiocese in the Middle East with 230,000 parishioners and 150 priests, Archbishop Matar is in a position of wide-reaching influence.

His diocese also contains 25 of the 90 villages in the Metn area and he is clearly engaged in political issues. His desire for a united Lebanon appears genuine, but he is also proud of the Maronite's traditional roles in the country. He agreed to continue communicating with various factions over the next few months and with the Ambassador, as well. We also suspect that Matar has another election on his mind: the election, which is inevitable at some point, to succeed 87-year-old Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. (In the election for Patriarch, the Maronite bishops vote, but the Vatican must confirm the choice.) Matar is widely assumed to be one of the front-runners.

FELTMAN